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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000450

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DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

LONDON FOR POL/RIEDEL

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PINS PINR CE NO JA LTTE

SUBJECT: LTTE to participate in sixth round of talks in Japan -- and says it will raise ship incident

Refs: (A) Oslo 506

- (B) Colombo 430 and previous

(U) Classified by Lewis Amselem, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d)

**¶11. (C) SUMMARY:** After much back-and-forth, the Tigers have decided to attend the sixth round of talks slated to take place in Japan, March 18-21. In agreeing to attend, the Tigers have made clear they will complain about the recent sinking of one of their ships by the navy. The Norwegian facilitators have called for the ceasefire accord to be modified so as to prevent a repetition of such incidents. The talks appear bound to be contentious. END SUMMARY.

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LTTE will attend talks  
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**¶12. (SBU)** The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have decided to participate in the sixth round of talks with the GSL slated to be held March 18-21 in Hakone, Japan. The Tigers' decision comes after much back-and-forth in the past week, as the group vociferously complained about the March 10 sinking of one of their supply ships by the Sri Lankan navy (see Ref B). Indeed, at times, the LTTE strongly hinted it would not attend the talks due to the March 10 incident. Concerns on this score were heightened when LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran refused to meet Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen during the latter's visit to the LTTE-controlled Wanni region last week. While LTTE chief negotiator Anton Balasingham and political chief S.P. Thamilchelvam did meet Helgesen, Prabhakaran was said to be in a high-level meeting examining next steps for the peace process in light of the March 10 incident. In the end, the Tigers decided to participate, signaling their final decision to the GSL over the March 15-16 weekend.

**¶13. (U)** On March 17, with the talks set, the Sri Lankan government's Peace Secretariat confirmed the following makeup of the GSL and LTTE delegations:

GSL:

-- G.L. Peiris, Minister of Constitutional Affairs  
-- Milinda Moragoda, Minister of Economic Reform  
-- Rauf Hakeem, Minister of Ports and Shipping  
-- Defense Secretary Austin Fernando.  
-- Ambassador Bernard Goonetilleke, head of the peace Secretariat

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LTTE:

-- Anton Balasingham, chief LTTE spokesman and chief negotiator  
-- Adele Balasingham, delegation's secretary and wife of Anton Balasingham  
-- S.P. Thamilchelvam, political chief  
-- Karuna, eastern region commander  
-- Kumaran Pulithovan, head of the LTTE's Peace Secretariat

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-- Suthakaran, LTTE media unit  
-- J. Maheswaran, Tamil Rehabilitation Organization

((Note: Both delegations are basically unchanged from those that attended previous rounds. Re the GSL team, Hakeem had argued that he should be allowed to lead a separate Muslim group to the talks, but was overruled by Prime Minister Wickremesinghe.)))

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Tigers to raise Ship Incident  
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**¶14. (SBU)** In agreeing to attend the talks, the LTTE made clear it would use them to complain about the March 10

ship incident. In a March 15 posting on TamilNet, a pro-LTTE website, for example, Balasingham was quoted as stating: "Our leadership felt that expressing direct condemnation of the Sri Lankan navy for sinking our merchant vessel in most severe terms at the talks to the government, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM), and the international community would be more appropriate at this juncture (than boycotting the talks)." (Note: The Tigers continue to stir up trouble on-the-ground over the March 10 incident. As has been their practice in the last several days, the Tigers are sponsoring general strikes in areas of the north and east protesting the incident. The latest strike took place in Batticaloa and Ampara districts in the east today. Many stores and offices were forced to close and transport stopped in these areas.)

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Norwegians want to review Ceasefire Accord  
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15. (C) Per Ref A, in acknowledging the difficulties arising from the March 10 incident and previous confrontations at sea, the Norwegian facilitators have signaled that the February 2002 ceasefire agreement could usefully be reviewed. In March 14 public remarks, for example, DFM Helgesen made clear that the two sides should work out modalities on how to deal with each other at sea, so that there is no more violence. Helgesen also indicated that the issue of each sides' detaining of the other's troops needs review. (Note: The LTTE, in particular, has on several occasions "arrested" GSL soldiers and police, effectively holding them captive for weeks at a time.)

16. (SBU) ((Note: FYI. The Norwegian-run SLMM has released its report on the March 10 incident. In the report, the SLMM ruled that it could not make a final determination about the incident due to a lack of information, caused by neither sides' contacting it regarding the incident until it was too late. In comments that jibe with those of Helgesen's above, the report went on to stress that the SLMM was willing to work out modalities between the LTTE and GSL in order to avert future clashes.))

17. (SBU) In addition to security-related issues, the sixth round is also slated to focus on the delivery of development assistance, resettlement issues, and human rights.

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COMMENT  
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18. (C) While it is positive that the Tigers are on board for the talks (it would have been a serious setback for peace if they had boycotted), the Hakone round seems bound to be contentious. The Tigers are clearly planning to use the talks as a soapbox to criticize the government over the March 10 incident. That said, if the Norwegians can successfully focus the talks on ways to improve the ceasefire accord, the negotiations could prove constructive. In particular, as Helgesen has noted, the two sides clearly need to address the issue of how to handle LTTE resupply efforts. Continued military engagements at sea over the issue are roiling the peace process. If the process is to gain back its momentum, modalities of some sort need to be worked out in this area. Whether the two sides have the patience or even inclination to do this in the current sour atmosphere appears a tough sell and is a test of the process' long-term viability. END COMMENT.

19. (U) Minimize considered.  
WILLS